

## **SCHWEITZER CALLS COAL-METHANE MEETING**

*By Matt Gouras*

HELENA — Gov. Brian Schweitzer called the coal-bed methane industry and environmentalists to his office Wednesday for a presentation on how the opposing interests worked together in Alberta.

Both sides called the meeting constructive, and said there could be some value to working together. But can groups who have been at odds for years, and who have been pitted against one another in courtrooms and regulatory hearings, really get along?

“That will take awhile,” said Bruce Williams of the Fidelity Exploration and Production Co., which runs 730 coal-bed methane wells in Montana.

Wyoming, to the south, has developed far more coal-bed methane than Montana. And Alberta, to the north, has ramped up its production in recent years at a much faster rate than Montana.

Schweitzer asked an Alberta developer to talk about ways the resource has been “responsibly” developed in Canada.

Schweitzer said he learned that Alberta is largely holding off on developing coal-bed methane similar to that found in Montana as it works through environmental concerns. He said new technologies will make responsible development possible.

“I’d like to develop it; I just want to make sure we do it right,” Schweitzer said in an interview after the meeting. “I’m absolutely convinced we will be developing this form of natural gas.”

He said he invited conservationists, irrigators and the major Montana players in the coal-bed methane industry because he thinks Alberta has done some things right. Michael Gatens, of Unconventional Gas Resources in Alberta, said early collaboration is needed and developers must act responsibly. He blamed some early developers in the United States for doing a poor job and giving the industry a bad name.

Coal-bed methane needs to be developed “in an environmentally sustainable way or it will not be developed,” he told the governor and more than a dozen conservationists and energy company representatives.

Schweitzer asked questions about the regulations and tax environment in Canada. He says he needs to know this information to make sure Montana is competitive, and to make sure interest groups aren’t playing one region off another in an attempt to get a better deal.

The governor said he believes there are some lessons to be learned about the development in Alberta.

“Sometimes it makes sense to sit down and visit about these things,” he said during the three-hour meeting.

A farmer and member of the Northern Plains Resource Council, Roger Muggli, seemed skeptical. He said the industry doesn’t pay attention to soil problems that waste water from coal-bed methane can create.

“This is real, and this is dangerous,” he said.

Jeff Barber with the Montana Environmental Information Center said the way they have defused some conflict in Alberta sounds better than in Montana, in particular giving more rights to the surface landowners in cases where they don’t own the minerals.

Williams, with Fidelity, called the meeting a “good exchange of information.” “Collaboration makes a lot of sense,” he said. “I think the governor bringing us together is good.”